

Honours all round

Birmingham Philharmonic
Orchestra

Adrian Boult Hall



To say that this programme was a challenge is an understatement, as each of the four pieces offered is a showpiece for any orchestra.

Conductor Michael Lloyd and his players rose magnificently to the occasion, opening with a splendid appreciation of Rimsky-Korsakov's brilliant *Capriccio Espagnol*. Soloists shone, from guest leader Byron Parish, to a silky clarinet, haunting flute cadenza, warm lower strings, and the neat percussion team highlighting much Spanish splendour.

Then to Richard Strauss, pulling out all the composing stops and tricks of the trade, to wind up players and listeners to fever pitch with his passionate *Death and Transfiguration*. This was beautifully paced and imaginatively balanced throughout, but one would have wished to have actually heard the lugubrious gong

intended to underpin a heart-stopping undertow from lower strings and timpani. Relentless Strauss key changes brought out a true tingle factor with the inevitable soaring brass and repeated final motives. Magnificent throughout.

More R Strauss, although *Don Juan* took time to settle after a worryingly untidy start. Oboist Patricia Moore's poignant depiction of our hero's beloved was cushioned by lush muted strings, and finally predictable heroic horns thrilled with typical Strauss – then to the fourth blockbuster of the evening: Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*.

A master of orchestration (professor Rimsky-Korsakov's pupil), Stravinsky uses the whole orchestral palette. Faithfully interpreted by orchestra and conductor, notable magic occurred with Alison Brierley's solo bassoon, shimmering pianissimo strings, bell-like single harp notes, and the ethereal solo horn heralding a final brilliance of blazing brass. And, to quote Berlioz: "Add a triangle trill to a red-hot orchestra to turn it white hot!" Another 'trick of the trade' – just so!

Maggie Cotton